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## **ASTA GENERAL STATEMENT ON THE DECISION MADE BY WORK HEALTH AND SAFETY MINISTERS ON DECEMBER 13<sup>TH</sup>, 2023.**

- AStA rejects this decision since this risk can be mitigated by applying and enforcing WHS standards and regulations.
- The Work Health and Safety Ministers' decision leaves the door open to keep manufacturing other high silica content materials with no entry barriers such as licensing or inspection controls.
- AStA is committed to collaborating with the Government to achieve the proper regulation to address the common goal of eradicating any occupational diseases from the industry.
- A more effective approach is to allow products containing less crystalline silica, with additional education, licensing, and safety measures.

AStA – the Agglomerated Stone Manufacturers Association – was formed in 2010 to promote environmental health and safety standards with all stakeholders in the agglomerated stone industry, including manufacturers, fabricators and their employees.

We would like to express our full sympathy to all the workers who have contracted silicosis in the stone industry. This is a tragic situation considering it is well established that silicosis, and other occupational diseases, are 100% preventable, as was also acknowledged by Safe Work Australia Decision Regulation Impact Statement (DRIS).

As Safe Work Australia DRIS confirms *“it is tolerably clear that historically there has been insufficient compliance activities in respect of the engineered stone industry for the level of risk. Further, there has been, and continues to be, non-compliance with the obligations imposed by the model WHS laws, by both PCBUs and workers ... despite significant education and awareness-raising activities as well as compliance and enforcement action by WHS regulators.”* The communique from the Work Health and Safety and Workplace Relations Ministers' Meeting on 13 December 2023 also declares that *“silicosis is preventable, but WHS laws are not protecting workers due to a persistent lack of compliance with obligations and responsibilities under these laws across industry at all levels”*. However, instead of addressing the lack of compliance as the cause of this occupational disease, the Australian Government has decided to ban engineered stone altogether. AStA respects the work conducted by the Australian institutions but rejects this decision, which not only overlooks the root cause, but also ignores the fact that like all industrial products that contain hazards for workers, the risk can be mitigated by applying and enforcing WHS standards and regulations. This includes the use of proper equipment and adherence to safety controls, practices successfully employed by stonemasons worldwide.



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By banning only one product containing silica, the Work Health and Safety Ministers' decision leaves the door open for stonemason to keep manufacturing other high-silica content materials (such as granite and quartzites with up to 90% of crystalline silica) with no entry barriers such licensing or inspection controls. This will create the dangerous impression that all other stone products are safe, even if they contain higher levels of silica than the engineered stone products currently on the market. With this scenario, there is a risk that silicosis cases increase within the stone industry – the opposite of what Federal, State and Territory ministers hope to achieve.

Given the availability of the low-silica engineered stone products, a complete ban on the product that leaves high silica natural stone products available, seems an inappropriate and ineffective approach to achieve the goal of eliminating silicosis and other diseases in the industry. A less disruptive and more effective approach to tackling this issue is to allow products containing less crystalline silica (which is less than other stone products) to be available in the market, with additional education and safety measures, including the introduction of a nationwide licensing scheme for all parties that handle stone backed by rigorous enforcement by well-resourced regulators.

ASTA is open to collaborating with the Government to achieve proper regulations to address the common goal of eradicating any occupational diseases from the industry. Likewise, ASTA and its members will defend their businesses from the effects of this decision.